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Craving contact: Washington bounces back from head injury

By Dwayne McLemore

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Defensive end Devin Washington - fitted with a Guardian cap on his helmet - listens to coach Deke Adams during the South Carolina football team's practice Tuesday afternoon.

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COLUMBIA, SC — Devin Washington is celebrating more than a birthday this spring.

The redshirt freshman from Orlando turned 19 on Monday. He met another milestone two days earlier at Williams-Brice Stadium with his first significant physical football contact in seven months.

"That was fun," Washington said. "I was thinking a lot because I'm still trying to learn the defense better. I enjoyed it. I can't wait for [the scrimmage] Saturday."

The 6-foot-3, 226-pound Washington this spring is fighting for a spot in the Gamecocks' defensive end rotation. It's a key step in his comeback from a concussion that cut his 2013 season short -- way short.

Pain started as a headache about a week into preseason camp in August. Washington continued to practice, but the headache wouldn't go away.

"You get headaches in football all the time. I just thought, 'Just suck it up and keep going,' " he recalled. "After four days, it was constant and I couldn't sleep, so I finally went and told someone."

Washington was diagnosed with a concussion. In hindsight, those extra practice sessions and contact made things worse.

He returned to the practice field sideline in a support role in late September, often wearing sunglasses to limit sunlight's impact on his condition. He was able to work out with the team - with no contact - before the Capital One Bowl.

Washington turned to his faith as he pondered his football future.

"There were times I would think to myself, 'Is it smart to go back out there?' " he said. "I've had tons of injuries. Football players, we break bones and stuff like that, but a concussion, you're talking about the brain and it's serious. I had those moments. I would start praying and God would show me. I started getting better. I'm good now. Obviously he wants me out here for something."

Washington's head is a little big these days, and for good reason. His helmet is fitted a Guardian cap, extra padding designed to reduce the impact of contact.

"They've got me in this right now. It's just to stay safe," he said. "We don't want anything else to happen. I haven't had any symptoms in four or five months."

Washington also makes it a point to stay busy with community service. In addition to being the public relations representative for USC's Special Olympics chapter, he and other Gamecocks spend time with a seventh-grade Saluda cancer patient.

"I'm trying to do more than just football," he said. "We have this opportunity. We're blessed to come out here and play. We should take this and use it to give back to others."

Washington was a four-star prospect, according to 247Sports, when he signed with USC out of Jones High in 2013.

While he came into last summer wanting to compete for playing time, he looks back on his redshirt season as a "blessing in disguise." He was able to watch and learn from the older players, and it afforded him a chance to focus more on schoolwork.

This spring includes competition but is still all about learning, Washington said.

"My goals are to get better, learn the defense and get acclimated to playing football again," he said. "God has been looking out for me. The concussion was just a stepping stone. Things gets thrown at you in life. I just took it as a learning tool and a time to get better and perfect my craft."

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